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ESSAY | William Safire

In Flagrante Defecto

WASHINGTON
Three intelligence stories converge this week to raise fascinating questions.

1. In the case of the Ukrainian seaman trying to defect near New Orleans: *Did our National Security Agency inform the State Department in timely fashion of what its "Big Ear" had learned about the Soviet Embassy's instructions to drug the returned defector?*

This has not yet come out: The Soviet grain-ship captain called his embassy on an open line. The embassy chewed out the captain for allowing U.S. officials aboard, and directed him to give the errant Ukrainian, who had cut his wrist after being forced by inept customs officials to return, a drug whose name sounded like "amino-zin," which they thought might make him woozily malleable.

Despite evidence of Soviet drugging of a man attempting to defect, State let the Russians have their seaman back. Where's the tape of the phone call? Who at State heard it? When?

2. In the case of the revolving-door K.G.B. colonel, Vitaly Yurchenko: *Was the C.I.A. hoodwinked again into accepting the bona fides of a planted defector?*

When the K.G.B. man held his press conference, the C.I.A. inexcusably froze, giving the Russians a propaganda field day with a phony charge that one of their men had been kidnapped and tortured and had heroically escaped from a restaurant in Georgetown. Belatedly, friends of the C.I.A. are fanning out all over town to assure us that poor Vitaly was merely a heartbroken lover, rejected by a Soviet diplomat's wife who was willing to play around with a K.G.B. colonel but not a defector.

Critics of the C.I.A. say that the K.G.B. man was not properly "nurtured" by his handlers, and that if he had been pampered and loved, would never have "changed his mind."

Both theories overlook the fact that this spy is a trained liar who long ago chose deception as a way of life. In the grand tradition of Yuri Nosenko and "Fedora," Mr. Yurchenko was a fake defector. He came over to diddle the Director, make our spooks look like saps and titillate the F.B.I. with dark hints about Congress. Presumably the fast-talking spy has discredited polygraph tests for years to come.

The task force chief, Colin Thompson, should have given him a rigorous, skeptical debriefing and quarantined him on suspicion of carrying contagious *dezinformatsia*. The slim pickings offered, and the Russian's failure to supply the names of assets we know reported to him in Canada,

should have set off warning bells; instead, he was embraced and touted in the worst example of C.I.A. naïveté since William Colby fired James Angleton and vouched for the planted Mr. Nosenko. No wonder so many of us suspect that Mount Alto moles burrow where orchids used to grow.

3. In the case of "Halloween Massacre II," in which 11 of the 20 members of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board were dismissed: *Has an attempt been made to protect the agency from too-probing questioning?*

The official reason for the head-rolling at Pfiab is that the board had become unwieldy, but in fact four appointees will soon be added: Jeane Kirkpatrick, Gen. Bernard Schriever and Profs. Albert Wohlstetter and James Q. Wilson. Among the 11 put over the side were the economists Alan Greenspan and Martin Anderson, Adm. Thomas Moorer, Gen. Robert Barrow, Profs. Eugene Rostow and Paul Seabury, Edward Bennett Williams and former Ambassador Seymour Weiss.

Mr. Weiss was supposedly bounced for speaking out too much at meetings, but it was actually because he was persnickety about Central American results. Edward Bennett Williams, now fired from the same job by two Presidents, is said to have interested himself in "penetration" of our agencies by the K.G.B. (Probably at vice chairman Leo Cherne's urging, Mr. Williams has just been slipped back in as "counsel to the board.")

Some of those dropped are no great loss; turnover is healthy, and 20 is too many for a board. But with the main C.I.A. action in Nicaragua, the possibility of a mole at Langley, and the agency just taken to the cleaners by the K.G.B., this seems hardly the time to be replacing experienced hands with estimable academics who will take years to get up to speed. And with huge sums going for economic intelligence, it seems odd to strip the board evaluating the quality of that research of its economists.

In each of these cases, targets of the questions will be comforted by the advice Mr. Yurchenko says he offered his worried 16-year-old son: "If you really think about it, you can always find a way out of any situation." □